

Youth and Politics in an Evolving Democracy

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The Implications of Politicising Youth

Come November this year, an estimated 432,000 Bhutanese citizens are eligible to go to the polls to elect the party which will form the government for the next five years. It is difficult to gauge how many will actually do so but the question on our minds is, who will the Bhutanese people vote for... and why? The underlying question is, what have we learned over the past 10 years of democratic governance?

A parliamentary democracy works when people become empowered and engaged citizens and thus vote responsibly. To vote responsibly, people need to understand how a democratic government functions and, to understand the functioning of government, they must be educated in governance. In an ideal situation this would be done through education in political science and civics and through exposure to open and healthy political discourse and debate.

This paper focuses on young Bhutanese citizens and voters including the voters of the future. What are they learning about democracy and government? What are we teaching them? How have two general elections affected them? What needs to be done?

About 56 percent of the population are under the age of 25 years, and youth make up about a third of our electorate¹. How will this significant group of voters choose their leaders if they do not understand the system of government and politics that lies at the heart of democracy? There's little that prepares our youth to be good citizens as we tend to focus on the mechanics of elections or the actions of parliament. There is no formal education on politics in our schools and even colleges and there is very little open discussion.

Are we becoming more caught up with the rituals of democracy rather than the ideals and values of democracy? How is Bhutan's younger generation learning about democracy today and how can we create a more realistic approach to enable youth to explore and understand democracy? Are we building adequate citizenship skills among young people?

¹ The 2005 national census show that there are about 147,36 youth between the ages of 17-27 in 2018. The voting age is 18. If we take the expected voter registration to be about 432,000 (ECB estimates), youth will make up close to 34% of the cohort of people who can vote in the country.

Our education system has not caught up with the changes required. Civics texts -- drafted before democracy was introduced -- are outdated descriptions of institutions and their processes. Politics has not been included in the school curriculum. Social Studies², taught as a subject in schools, is different from Civics Education which, according to the United States Centre for Civics Education, “is education in self-government. Democratic self-government means that citizens are actively involved in their own governance; they do not just passively accept the dictums of others or acquiesce to the demands of others”. Civics education needs to enable citizens to widen their understanding of the ideals of democracy and understand the values and principles of democracy after discussion and reasoning. It can also enable youth to become more engaged citizens in society.

At the tertiary level there are two colleges that teach political science with a focus on international politics and discussions that are not necessarily related to Bhutan. “Many people are not used to discussing politics in Bhutan,” says Kencho Pelzom, a political science lecturer. “While students become more aware by the time they get to their final college year, they don’t see politics as something that they can care about and not just as a career option.”

Outside the academia, discussion on democracy and politics in the social media tend to be filled with characteristic banter and unverified opinions that do not help advance understanding of what’s happening in the country. Social media discussions tend to become platforms for people to launch attacks on political ideas³, as is demonstrated the world over. It is no different in Bhutan. Online content moderation can only treat the symptoms of online abuse. Education is the long-term and only recourse to address the roots of toxic content in the media, including social media which is the main source of information for Bhutanese youth.

The Sensitivity of Politics

In Bhutan many aspects of politics are considered “sensitive” issues. Political processes are strictly guided by rules and regulations we’ve put in to “protect” ourselves in the early years of democratisation and herein lies the challenge to the democratisation of governance.

The ECB’s call for non-partisanship that guides schools, colleges, and civil society organisations is a deterrent to discussions in educational institutions.

2 Social studies offered from class four upwards focuses on Bhutan’s history and geography with an emphasis on culture.

3 Amnesty International’s latest annual report on the state of the world’s human rights documents a global rise in what it describes as “state sponsored hate”, and chronicles the variety of ways governments and leaders are increasingly supporting hateful rhetoric and policies that seek to demonise marginalised groups, alluding to what is happening now in the United States of America.

Civil servants are required to be apolitical, a norm for many public servants in governments across the world. The only difference is that in a country of less than 750,000 people of whom the best educated are civil servants, this severely limits public discussion on democracy among Bhutan's educated populace.

While these intentions may be good, democracy is not a “sensitive” issue. The Election Commission of Bhutan's advisory to limit public activities in the periods before elections is another example of this safeguard. While well-intended, people have misunderstood these provisions as setting limits to open discussion on politics resulting in a closed society not conducive to exploring or learning about democracy.

In 2013, a year of elections, a high school in Chukha decided to cancel invitations to candidates for the National Council who are not affiliated to political parties to speak to their students in the belief that they would be considered partisan. A noteworthy event, however, was an open forum held at the Royal Thimphu College in the same year where presidents of the five political parties took to the stage to speak to a full auditorium of youth.

Academics teaching in colleges have observed self-censorship amongst Bhutanese youth who are generally not able to recognise the affinity between being patriotic and being constructively critical which is healthy in a democracy. “We put that pressure on youth. Right from the beginning, our schools try to teach them what they can talk about and what they cannot,” says an academic. We are a populace that shies away from questioning authority and hierarchy even if it's to seek clarification. Hence the tendency to turn to anonymous means of “only criticising” and holding the government accountable that takes a malicious in tone instead of a more healthy open system of feedback.

If we are to take ownership of changes in the system of governance there needs to be more space for open discussion on politics. It's as if a well-meaning parent is “schooling” us to be more democratic through deliberate instructions. And instead of the real crux and values of democracy, we pay attention to the rites, and rituals of parliamentary form and language.

Bringing It Out in the Open

We have created an atmosphere where it is misunderstood that only candidates for elections can discuss politics in public. All political discussions are confined to homes or whispered in the cubicles of the bureaucracy. The muted discussions are replaced by the state broadcaster beaming faces and sound-bites of would-be candidates and appearing as election news in newspapers that are facing a declining readership.

In the discussions on youth and politics, bureaucrats and lawmakers, media and civil society, and the average citizens have openly expressed fears of “politicising” youth. In this context the term “politicise” implies that, rather than educating youth to understand democracy and governance, we are labelling everything, even daily activities, as being politically motivated. We may be teaching youth the rituals of behaving like politicians. Hence the hesitation to “politicise” youth.

To understand the term “politicise” take the extreme example of a group of friends who went to see the Black-Necked Crane in Phobjikha. One asked the others if the group may be dubbed Druk Phuensum Tshogpa (DPT) supporters by going to see the cranes. This is politicising the Black-Necked Crane.

In the realm of party politics there is a tradition of establishing “youth wings” of political parties for the wrong reasons. If we take examples across South Asia, political parties recruit university students to agitate and even close down their universities by calling strikes based on party interests. Youth behave like politicians instead of questioning the vision and ideologies of parties to find out what they stand for, to understand political promises and intentions. Political parties in Bhutan are deterred by electoral legislation from having youth wings. Parties have made scattered attempts in the past two elections to reach out to youth but they were largely focussing on youth issues and youth as voters to get their votes.

Introducing Politics to Youth

Efforts to introduce political processes to the younger generation include the Bhutan Children’s Parliament (BCP) and democracy clubs in educational institutions.

There are 205 democracy clubs and about 7,190 student members in schools across Bhutan. The clubs focus on the process of elections and some MPs have expressed concern about them becoming politicised organisations in schools in the future.

Students elect members to a Bhutan Children’s Parliament formed in 2015 for members ranging from the ages of 13 to 24. The BCP meets annually in a parliament hall at the Election Commission of Bhutan (ECB) and makes recommendations described as “resolutions” on various issues.

The legitimacy of the Bhutan Children’s Parliament was questioned in parliament in 2017. “It’s important to advocate and educate our children on democracy and it’s all the better if our children understand this at an early age,” said the then National Council chairperson, Dasho Dr Sonam Kinga when

discussing the BCP in Parliament. “However, the risk is that our children and education system could be politicised.”

National Council (NC) member Dasho Tashi Wangyal pointed out that with more political parties coming up, it’s a matter of time when schools and colleges will have student political bodies and recommended that the house reject a budget for the BCP.

NC members acknowledged that educating and raising awareness on democracy and the political system among youth was crucial. But both NC and opposition party members cautioned against the BCP for its excessive implementation costs and for the risks it poses on youth. Almost a quarter of the participants are above 21 years.

The intention to build leadership skills and enable youth voice to emerge is laudable but has the BCP, in trying to emulate parliament, overstepped its educational function and begun to behave like a real life parliament? BCP role models the functions of Parliament and observers have expressed discomfort in watching children act out the rituals of parliament. Many also questioned the validity of resolutions proposed by the BCP. Following the Parliament’s request – reviewers from various organisations⁴ invited to the education ministry in October 2017 suggested that the age group for BCP be revised. Current members are aged from 13-24, too wide a gap and the younger children are subject to the influence of teachers or the older youth. Having a smaller age gap would promote more active discussions.

The BCP’s “constitution” encourages students to learn about the roles and responsibility of citizens in nation-building and in sustaining democracy besides providing a platform for democracy clubs to come together. The review recommended that the BCP be decentralised to the district level so more students can participate in the educational exercise rather than a centralised national “sitting” with the high costs of bringing in teachers and students to the capital for their parliament sitting.

The review also recommended that the BCP stop sharing the proceedings of its sittings with higher authorities so that the sessions become less formal and less prone to be scripted by teachers or by older youth. This will enable the youth to have freer discussions and not be afraid of making “mistakes” nor of having to make concrete recommendations for government. The Education Minister announced in Parliament in January 2018 that the BCP will continue but that its “resolutions” are not binding even if they are shared with government. It is unclear how the BCP will be revised at the time of writing this article.

4 The review team included representation from government, CSOs and the ECB.

Back to Society

The process of democratic change and elections is developing in a system that's engineered to avoid any possibility of party "influence", and to enable people to vote without "fear or favour". Perhaps it's time to think of a middle path option and to free up some space for the younger generation to think about why they vote for a particular candidate in the context of governance, and not just because of family connections or personalities, among others.

Those in governance should support activities that enable citizens to learn to become more engaged, not just through instruction and directives, but through research and exploration. Emphasis can be placed on teaching and showing youth how to take on the responsibilities of becoming more engaged in our own society and, eventually, the nation.

How can we make the population, the voters, and the youth think about the system within which we live, think about the people whom they want to elect, and ask them to take positions on issues to improve the lives of the people? Have they considered the political parties' views on gender, on hydropower, on employment, on our development plans, and our education system amongst the many other national concerns?

We have the opportunity and duty to open up space for politics to become a daily topic and focus of discussion. There are also many meaningful opportunities for the average person to become more connected with the system of governance be it at the local level, thromde level, or national discussions. Citizen action such as volunteerism, lending support to community needs, sitting on committees, helping to fund raise for local needs and giving constructive feedback to the authorities are all worthy examples of being active citizens.

Dilemma of a Small Society

Our youth could first learn about the functioning of government. What is good governance and how does good governance create and strengthen a sovereign country where the well-being of people is a priority?

While wanting our youth to learn about democracy, we're also being protective and paternalistic, making youth hesitate to discuss politics openly. Political candidates talk about how their own friends and contacts become uncomfortable around them once they join a political party. With the social discomfort in associating with political parties and candidates, how will we convince youth that democracy is a worthy and important process? We see families and friends

who, in an effort to keep the peace, no longer openly discuss politics if they suspect the other side is supporting another political party. The coalition of political parties through the Bhutan Democracy Dialogue has recognised a need to maintain “harmony” in our democracy and has drafted a voluntary pledge for parties to avoid “influencing voters based on regionalisation and religion, and refrain from any act of dividing the society” amongst other pledges⁵.

Democracy is about openness. It is important to address this contradiction in the years to come. It will not be done overnight, nor can it be resolved through rules and legislation alone. Our decision-makers have to accept that we cannot have democracy without politics, and create opportunities for open discussion and learning through the home, the school, media, and the public and civil domain. Democracy is also about values and the daily action and decisions we make that contribute to the success of a democratic system. Democracy requires us to make “wise” decisions, to choose our own leaders and become more engaged with our own society. This requires informed and responsible participation in various aspects of community life by competent citizens who are committed to the fundamental values of democracy.

Bhutan can make more effort to promote informed, responsible participation in areas of governance related to society and community, thus enabling citizens to learn to be more participatory, starting from the home, in school, and in the neighbourhood. Encouraging volunteerism is a step towards more civic engagement. We can also do more to get young people involved in their own communities and in shaping their own rules in schools for example.

Civics education should be made central to the education system. It cannot be taught or learnt through extra curricular activities alone. Media and democracy clubs and the BCP, while laudable, makes the lessons of democracy available only to a small cohort of students.

In a year of elections, youth are expected to vote responsibly and many who come to the polls will have to think about our society, the political parties, or even candidates, and what implications the elections will have on Bhutan’s long-term sovereignty. We cannot relegate this learning process to media coverage alone.

It is time to put “politics and democracy” into our daily vocabulary and daily discussion. Just like economics, culture, society, spirituality – politics and democracy is about life. And it’s time our youth learn to think and talk about these issues. It’s not just about how we vote, but why we vote.

5 Pledges by political parties shared after the Bhutan democracy Dialogue’s All Party Conference 2017.